

BERLIN TO SOUTH FRANCE AND RETURN! (June 1975 article)

The following might be of some interest to members; it concerns a trip I did in mid-April to the south of France to rescue a mate's BMW and its sidecar. (Even if it doesn't prove of interest, it will fill up a couple of pages of the mag!)

It all began on the Thursday afternoon at work in the Flower Market. The Boss said I had three days' leave owing from last year and had to take it before May. Now: Gunnar's BMW was stuck in Cubnezais (a little village in South France) as it blew a piston on the way there to pick fruit last year.

I had just had my cylinders rebored and it was just a matter of putting everything back together and I would have a "goer". We got to thinking that we could work all Friday afternoon and evening on my bike and then I could go down and pick up Gunnar's bike and sidecar, leaving straight from work on Saturday afternoon. It was midnight Friday when we finally got my sidecar unhitched and had everything finished.

Got away a little later than planned on Saturday afternoon and it was dark by the time I got to the check point leaving Berlin to go through East Germany. After having my passport checked about five times I was on the way through East Berlin (on roads that make the NSW section of the Hume Highway seem bowling green smooth). Only 10 minutes or so later it started raining and the bike (Herman) started missing. I pushed on a bit further but it was no good. I had 1,000 miles to go and that was only to my destination – I had to get back as well. With this in mind I turned round and went back to West Berlin. The East guards weren't very impressed with someone going and coming on the same trip, but after a bit of questioning they let me go. I slept at Gunnar's that night and next day traced the misfire to a faulty spark plug – brand new the day before.

Sunday afternoon I was off again, this time was not a false start. Herman felt a bit funny being solo for the first time, but it wasn't too bad, and after the lousy roads in East Germany I figured things could only get better. That was when the pannier bag went bouncing down the road after me. I strapped it on the back and continued on from service station to service station. (I was getting no better than about 30mpg).

Crossing the border into France on Monday morning I only rode about 50 miles before pulling into the side of the road for a bit of sleep. In the morning Herman wouldn't start, and when I checked the petrol tank I found out why – three drops of standard! I grabbed my one litre can and hitchhiked to the next garage, but on getting out of the truck I realised that shops and garages in the small places in France (and most garages in big towns as well) are closed on Mondays. I was saved by a mo-ped rider who took my empty can and a couple of francs and returned about ten minutes later with a full can. Eventually I was back on the road again.

About mid-day I stopped for a sausage and chips at a roadside kiosk and decided to drop the needles in the carbs hoping to lean out the mixture a bit as it was far too rich. I got no more black smoke after this, the petrol consumption rose to about 40mpg (still lousy for a solo) and the bike was running better up the top end. (By now I had gone over 700 miles so I was now cruising at whatever speed I could do – which wasn't very quick (60 or so) due to the sidecar gearing.

It was about three in the afternoon, really warm, and I was half way round a sweeping left hander. Down went the front tyre, "pack death" went me! My luck was in, I didn't drop it, but like a fool I had forgotten to bring my spare tube along with me. Oh well, there was a service station just down at the bottom of the hill. It reminded me of home: "I'm sorry, we don't do motorcycle repairs." The next town was 4km away. An hour later covered in sweat, exhausted, dry and with spots before my eyes, I got to the next garage. Yes, he could fix it. I pulled the wheel off and took out the tube only to find that my ride had ripped the valve out of the tube. What is it the French say? "C'est la vie".

Not to worry. There are two motorcycle shops in town (Oh! How I wished I had studied more French in class than making paper aeroplanes.) One shop was closed and the other didn't have any big sizes – C'est la vie...

I flagged down a bloke on a 750/4 and asked him if he had a spare tube that I could buy from him. He didn't have. C'est la vie... He was, however one of the dinky-di, true blue motorcyclists who will always help another in trouble. After explaining that I needed the tube "tout d'suite" (quickly) and not tomorrow, he rode 15km to the next big town, bought me a tube, took me back to Herman, helped me fit it, then refused any payment at all, even for the tube. (You meet the nicest people on a Honda!)

It was 7pm when I finally said "Goodbye" to L'Abbesle and rode off into the setting sun – just like in all the good "Bronson" movies!! That 4km ride had tired me out so I only rode until about 11pm before pulling in for another sleep. During the night it poured rain and I discovered a very pleasant fact – that U.S. Forces sleeping bags are really waterproof.

Off again and miserable weather. No front mudguard, too; the front tyre ripped it off when I had the flat. For me this was worse than for other BM's, as I have fitted an outside mounted alternator driven by V-belt off the crankshaft. This, of course, necessitated cutting two holes in the front cover for the belt. The whole unit is pretty good (waterproof) when I have my fairing and front mudguard but now I had no guard and I had taken off the fairing as I wasn't sure if Gunnar's sidecar would fit with it still on.

I limped and misfired to a garage where I changed a plug (just in case) and took off the front cover to see if it was wet in there. BLOODY HELL! Did I say WET? About ½ litre of water poured out. Continuing on with one, then two, then one cylinders, the weather dried up and Herman started running constantly on two again. Finally reached the thriving metropolis of Cubnezais (population about 100) at 2pm and had the sidecar fitted by four.

A really beautiful dinner followed (these French know how to eat) then sleep then a genuine French breakfast; a huge bowl of coffee to wash down French bread and butter with jam. Hmm!!

The original plan was to put Gunnar's BMW on the train at Bordeaux 30km away but I decided to try to get it back to Berlin on the sidecar as he would then have it all. With the help of a couple of the village lads the bike was lifted up and placed on the sidecar (facing backwards and with the petrol tank nearest my bike). It was then tied down with cord and I was ready to go.

One last meal and I was away – just!! It was missing a bit under load, but couldn't blame it on the water as it was bone dry. It's a funny feeling, being passed by a fully loaded tractor of 1 HP!

I got to the top of a hill with a good long downhill run so I decided that this was a good place to have a look at the motor, as I'd have a run to start it again – the kick starter being inoperable as it was on the sidecar side and the other bike was in the way.

The timing checked out okay so then I had a look at the carbs. The left one was opening nearly 1/8th of an inch before the other, and this was rectified. A monumental push...and no go! As I had a complete spare electrical system with me I decided to change the condenser next. This done I tried another push, and Herman reared to life on two cylinders as soon as I dropped the clutch.

Off I went again hoping to do a run straight to Berlin, still a good 800 miles away. It was about 1am as I was going around a corner when the whole outfit swayed across the road. When around the corner, I stopped, as it was by then okay. I checked the tyres, only to find that the rim of the sidecar was about an inch off the road and the tyre was bald, right through to the canvas. I decided to crawl slowly into the next village, have a sleep, then change the tyre when I awoke. The tyre had other ideas – BANG!! C'est la vie!

Idling along in first gear I came to a service station in the village of Malay de Fefit (boy – was it small!) Pulling into the service station drive I pumped up my airbed, crawled into my sleeping bag and dozed off. When I awoke it was light and there were French giggles coming from the front door of the house alongside the garage. Along with the giggles came an invitation to breakfast which I couldn't refuse, as I hadn't eaten since Cubnezais.

After breakfast I took the tyre and tube of Gunnar's front wheel and fitted them to the sidecar, filled up with petrol and pushed off – literally. Herman was running quite well and I was beginning to think that if I kept riding I'd get to Berlin by 4 or 5am just in time to start work. However, by the time I got to the border of East and West Germany I just couldn't go any further, as I was so cold and tired, and therefore took a hotel room, and as they say in the best novels, I was asleep before my head hit the pillow.

Next morning I crossed into East Germany for the final 200 mile run. The border guards couldn't believe that I wanted to ride 200 miles with a motorcycle strapped on behind, but when I explained that I had already ridden up from the South of France they just shook their heads and mumbled something about mad Westerners.

Just after getting through the border I hit reserve and sure enough ran out of petrol before getting to a garage. I wrote a little sign BENZIN (petrol) then waited till about an hour later when an East German stopped and gave me a few litres of his two stroke mix, only 33:1 so I figured it would be good for a bit of upper cylinder lubrication. With this I got to the next garage and then did a "garage crawl" all the way to Berlin, taking 9 hours to do the 200 miles.

Just to top off the trip perfectly, when I arrived back Gunnar and Evelyn were out! Total mileage: 1979 miles – petrol cost: 574 Deutch Marks – oil used: 1 ½ litres. Repairs: one condenser, two flat tyres, dropped carby needles, pannier bag fell off. WANTED: ONE NEW ARSE!!!!

Peter Sanders